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The biblical meaning of the term *elder*

(Further Reading: *Biblical Eldership*, pages 15-17; 31-34)

When most Christians think of church elders, they think of an official church board, lay officials, influential people within the local church, advisers to the pastor, policymakers, financial officers, fundraisers, or administrators. These ideas are different from those found in the New Testament, so I refer to such elders as “board elders;” they are not true biblical elders. They are committee men. Executives.

A true biblical eldership is not just a business committee. It’s a biblically qualified council of men that jointly pastors the local church. They teach the Word and are personally involved in the lives of people. To communicate the New Testament idea of eldership, we need to reeducate ourselves as to the New Testament usage of the term *elder*. In some cases we may even need to choose a different term.

The New Testament also uses a different term than *elder* to describe local church leaders. That term is *overseer*, and it comes from the Greek word *episkopos* (see Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:2). The term *overseer* was a common designation used by Greeks for a variety of officials. Unfortunately, the term gradually developed a meaning that was quite different from the New Testament usage. It became one of the most significant ecclesiastical titles of the hierarchical church. We know the term in English as *bishop*, meaning a church official who presides over many churches and the lower clergy. Thus the original sense of the term *episkopos*, which was interchangeable with *elder* and indicated a local church official, was lost.

If we choose to use the term *elder*, which many churches do because it is a key biblical term for church leaders, it is necessary to explain that the term *elder* means “pastor elders,” “shepherd elders,” or “pastors.” I know of churches that weren’t able to implement a biblical eldership until they dropped the term *elder* and called their elders “pastors.” Even the elders were helped by the language change. They started thinking of themselves as pastors who were responsible for the spiritual care of the flock and began to function as pastors. However, because of the clerical and professional connotations of the term *pastor*, most churches retain the biblical term *elder* and simply teach the congregation what the term actually means.

1. How would the people in your church define the term *elder* based on their experience with your eldership?
2. How would you define it based on your study of its use in Scripture?
3. What caused you to become interested in eldership?
4. What keeps you motivated as an elder, or makes you want to become an elder? (Or, if you would rather not be an elder, why is that?)
5. Rank the left column of activities based on how your eldership spends its time (“1” represents the most time, “15” the least). Rank the right column based on what you believe to be the ideal.

<input type="checkbox"/> Administrating	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrating
<input type="checkbox"/> Budgets	<input type="checkbox"/> Budgets
<input type="checkbox"/> Building Programs	<input type="checkbox"/> Building Programs
<input type="checkbox"/> Church Discipline	<input type="checkbox"/> Church Discipline
<input type="checkbox"/> Conflict Resolution	<input type="checkbox"/> Conflict Resolution
<input type="checkbox"/> Counseling	<input type="checkbox"/> Counseling
<input type="checkbox"/> Facilities Maintenance	<input type="checkbox"/> Facilities Maintenance
<input type="checkbox"/> Fund Raising	<input type="checkbox"/> Fund Raising
<input type="checkbox"/> Leading Committees	<input type="checkbox"/> Leading Committees
<input type="checkbox"/> Praying	<input type="checkbox"/> Praying
<input type="checkbox"/> Setting Policy	<input type="checkbox"/> Setting Policy
<input type="checkbox"/> Staff and Personnel Issues	<input type="checkbox"/> Staff and Personnel Issues
<input type="checkbox"/> Studying the Word	<input type="checkbox"/> Studying the Word
<input type="checkbox"/> Teaching	<input type="checkbox"/> Teaching
<input type="checkbox"/> Visiting the Sick	<input type="checkbox"/> Visiting the Sick

6. If your eldership devotes too much time to administration, name one strategic thing you can do to shift the emphasis to spiritual oversight?

2

A shepherd leads the flock

(Further Reading: *Biblical Eldership*, pages 25-29)

According to Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:1-4, elders are called to shepherd the church of God. In biblical language, to shepherd a nation or group of people means to lead or to govern (2 Samuel 5:2; Psalm 78:71-72). So to shepherd a local church means, among other things, to lead the church. To the church in Ephesus Paul states: “Let the elders who rule [lead, direct, manage] well be considered worthy of double honor” (1 Timothy 5:17a). Elders lead, direct, govern, manage, and care for the flock of God.

Leading and managing a flock is important because sheep are born followers. They must be led to fresh water, new pasture, and relief from dangerous summer heat. This often means traveling rugged roads and narrow paths through dangerous ravines. The sheep also must be made to rest. At evening, they must be brought into the fold. Thus shepherds must know how and where to lead their flock. They must use land and water supplies wisely, constantly planning for future needs and anticipating problems.

The same leading and managing principles involved in shepherding sheep also apply to shepherding the local church. The elders must clarify direction and beliefs for the flock. They must set goals, make decisions, give direction, correct failures, bring change, and motivate people. They must evaluate, plan, and govern. Elders, then, must be problem solvers, planners, thinkers, and managers of people.

A healthy, growing flock of sheep doesn’t just appear; it is the result of the shepherd’s skillful management of sheep and resources. A good shepherd elder knows how to assess the health and direction of the congregation, and he knows people. He knows their needs, troubles, weaknesses, and sins. He knows how sensitive they are, how they can hurt one another, how stubborn they can be, and how slowly and patiently they must be led. And when he doesn’t know these things, he is quick to find answers. He loves to learn better skills and methods for managing the flock.

Not only does leading a flock demand skill and knowledge, it requires hard work. How do working men lead the church while maintaining family life and employment? They do it by self-sacrifice, self-discipline, faith, perseverance, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Men who love Jesus Christ above all else willingly sacrifice self for the sake of others.

1. Consider the daily work of a literal shepherd. What is his primary concern? (For more information on the work of shepherds, see *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, by Phillip Keller.)
2. How would you describe the primary concern of shepherd elders?
3. Explain what the real-life equivalent of these shepherding duties would look like at your church:
 - Led to fresh water
 - Led to new pasture
 - Providing relief from dangerous summer heat
 - Safe guidance through rugged paths and dangerous ravines
 - Providing rest
 - Brought into the fold at night
 - Using land and water supplies wisely
 - Planning for future needs
 - Anticipating problems
 - Protection from predators
 - Keeping the sheep from straying
 - Protecting and healing from diseases
4. What are some ways men can sharpen and develop shepherding skills?
5. Share several insights you have learned about how to motivate people, resolve conflict, and correct failure.
6. One of the greatest obstacles elders face is finding the time to serve. The legitimate demands of vocation, family life, and shepherding can appear overwhelming. What practical advice can you give a man to help him make time for eldership?

3

A shepherd feeds the flock

(Further Reading: *Biblical Eldership*, pages 22-25)

Throughout the New Testament, extraordinary emphasis is placed on the importance of teaching God's Word. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was pre-eminently a teacher, and He commissioned others to teach all that He had taught (Matthew 28:20). To Peter He said, "Feed [teach] my sheep" (John 21:17, NIV). The apostles were teachers, and the early Christians steadfastly devoted themselves to teaching (Acts 2:42; 6:4). Barnabas sought Paul to come to Antioch to help teach (Acts 11:25-26). Paul exhorted Timothy to give attention to "the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13). In the order of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28, the teaching gift is listed third, after apostle and prophet. So, teaching is one of the greater gifts a congregation should desire (1 Corinthians 12:31).

Unlike modern board elders, all New Testament elders were required to be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2). In the list of elder qualifications in his letter to Titus, Paul states, "[the elder must hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, *that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict*" (Titus 1:9; italics added). Since elders are commanded to shepherd God's flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2), part of their task is to see that the flock is fed God's Word.

The importance of feeding sheep is evidenced by the fact that sheep are nearly incapable of feeding and watering themselves properly. Without a shepherd, sheep would quickly be without pasture and water, and would soon waste away. So, "everything depends on the proper feeding of the sheep. Unless wisely fed they become emaciated and sick, and the wealth invested in them is squandered. When Ezekiel presents a picture of the bad shepherd, the first stroke of his brush is 'he does not feed the flock.'"^{*}

The Christian community matures, grows, and is protected by the Word. That is why Scripture requires that an elder "be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). The elders protect, guide, lead, nourish, comfort, educate, and heal the flock by teaching and preaching the Word. Indeed, the failure of church elders to know and teach the Bible is one of the chief reasons doctrinal error floods churches today and drowns the power and life of the church.

^{*}Charles Edward Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd* (1912; repr. Fincastle: Scripture Truth, n.d.), pp. 59,60

1. How many of the elders at your church regularly teach the Word? (Be sure to include teaching from the pulpit, Sunday school, small groups, and so forth.)
2. Most elders have never been to Bible school or seminary. How can they be equipped to teach sound doctrine and refute error?
3. What are some of the needs at your church that could be addressed or resolved through skillful teaching of the Word?
4. George Muller, long-term elder and man of faith, read through the Bible more than one hundred times during his years of service. What system do you have in place for keeping your elders growing in their understanding and use of the Word?
5. How do you help the congregation at your church to continue growing in their own understanding and use of Scripture?
6. Describe your method for keeping the following age groups "well fed" with God's Word
 - Pre-school
 - Kindergarten through Sixth Grade
 - Jr. High
 - High School
 - Young Adults
 - Middle Adults
 - Mature Adults